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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001047

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DEPT FOR EAP, EAP/MTS, EAP/MLS, INR/EAP, INR/B

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: SENATE PRESIDENT UNDER PRESSURE FROM WITHIN HIS
PARTY AND IN THE SENATE

REF: A. 05 MANILA 4740

[1](#)B. 05 MANILA 3154

[1](#)C. 05 MANILA 2406

Classified By: Acting Pol/C Joseph L. Novak for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Opponents of Senate President Drilon took action on March 2 to strip him of his leadership position in the Liberal Party (LP). Drilon is contesting the move. Contacts are also reporting that Drilon is under pressure in the Senate from elements who want to see him removed from his post there. If Drilon loses his position in the Senate, it would be a political victory for Malacanang, but it almost certainly would not cure the Senate's ills, which include grandstanding and delays in action on legislation. End Summary.

LP Elements Challenge Drilon

[1](#)2. (U) On March 2, Manila Mayor Jose "Lito" Atienza, Jr. called a meeting of LP leaders and declared himself the party's new president, replacing Senate President Franklin Drilon. (Note: The Liberal Party is one of the largest and oldest political parties in the Philippines, with 32 members in the House and four in the Senate. President Arroyo is an Honorary Chair of the party. End Note.) Atienza also appointed Mike Defensor, President Arroyo's Chief of Staff, to be LP Chairman (a position formerly held by Atienza).

[1](#)3. (U) Atienza said he had undertaken the move in order to return the LP to the "status quo." He claimed that Drilon had failed to consult fully with other party leaders before he publicly announced that the LP was withdrawing support from President Arroyo in July 2005 (ref B). Atienza said he and others in the LP who still support President Arroyo had waited "patiently" for Drilon to call a meeting of party members to resolve the situation, but Drilon's refusal to discuss party matters had forced them to act.

Fighting Back

[1](#)4. (U) In response, Drilon publicly averred that he remained the President of the LP and that Atienza's actions violated party rules. He claimed that any decision reached at the March 2 meeting was not binding because a quorum of the LP National Executive Council was not present. Drilon vowed to take the matter up with the Commission on Elections (COMELEC). (Note: The position of party president in the

Philippines is key for electoral purposes because COMELEC recognizes the person in that spot as the authoritative representative of the party in formation of candidate lists and in terms of correspondence. End Note.)

15. (C) Liberal Party stalwart and longtime politician Jovito Salonga has offered to mediate the dispute between the two factions. Drilon's Chief of Staff Governor Antonio Gallardo told poloff on March 7 that Drilon would withhold action on a petition he filed with COMELEC over the weekend in deference to Salonga. (Note: In comments to the press, Benjamin Abalos, the head of COMELEC, has indicated that Drilon remained on the books as party president as far as his organization was concerned. End Note.)

Trouble for Drilon in the Senate?

16. (C) Contacts report that Drilon is also under pressure in the Senate from elements who want to see him removed from his post as Senate President. According to contacts, Malacanang has been pushing senators to join together to form a majority to challenge Drilon. Under Senate rules, a member may declare the position of Senate President "open" at any time with the support of a simple majority. The top candidate to challenge Drilon would likely be Manuel "Manny" Villar of the Nacionalista Party. Villar and Drilon reached a "gentleman's agreement" in 2004 to split the Senate President term between them. Drillon later said he would yield the position only if Villar had enough votes to unseat him. Other senators have had their eye on the position as well. Gallardo, Drilon's Chief of Staff, told poloff that he doubted that Drilon would be replaced, asserting that no other senator had enough votes

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to do so.

Comment

17. (C) If Drilon loses his position in the Senate, it would be a political victory for the pro-Arroyo camp. Malacanang has had it out for Drilon since he switched sides and demanded that President Arroyo resign during the height of political turmoil in July 2005. Even if Drilon is ousted (and it is not at all clear that he indeed will be), it almost certainly would not be a long-term cure for the Senate's many ills, which include constant infighting, grandstanding, and long delays in action on legislation.

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Bellard